

AUSTRALIA'S AMAZING CONFERENCE (AND WORK) ON DELIBERATIVE INNOVATIONS

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by Tom Atlee

Halfway around the planet from my home in Oregon lies Western Australia, where THE GOVERNMENT has been sponsoring remarkable innovations in community engagement and deliberative democracy for four and a half years. (Oh, how I wish it were happening in the U.S.!!)

At the forefront of this committed experiment in democratic collective intelligence are two remarkable politicians eager to move beyond cynicism and distrust -- Western Australia's Premier, Dr. Geoff Gallop, and his Minister of Infrastructure and Planning, Alannah MacTiernan. Behind the scenes, designing and organizing it all, has been my heartfelt, down-to-earth, brilliantly hyperactive Perth host -- one of the most creative, visionary process organizers I know -- Dr. Janette Hartz-Karp.

JANETTE HARTZ-KARP AND HER WORK

I first met Janette at the National Conference on Dialogue and Deliberation (NCDD) in Denver, CO, October 23-26, 2004. Long before that event, her workshop description made my mouth water:

Breakthrough Initiatives in Governing WITH the People: The Australian Experience

As a result of the last 4 years of planning with the community, Western Australia is now one of the world leaders in innovative approaches to deliberative democracy. Janette's presentation will outline the variety of techniques that have been applied, adapted and combined, including Citizen's Juries, Consensus Conferences, Consensus Forums, Deliberative Surveys, Multi Criteria Analysis Workshops, and "21st Century Town Meetings." The focus will be on how representativeness, deliberation and influence have been sought, and what has been learned. Participants will gain an understanding about the ways in which different deliberative democracy techniques have been applied and adapted in Western Australia, and will examine the critical success factors of deliberative democracy initiatives.

Before last summer, I had never heard of Janette or anything going on in Western Australia, but I definitely wanted to hear her presentation. I had been promoting multi-process approaches to community engagement for several years (see "Designing Multi-Process Public Participation Programs" and "Approaches to Community Engagement and the Generation of Community Wisdom" on <<http://co-intelligence.org/CommunityResourcesCII.html>>). I was often frustrated by the single-method, proprietary approaches taken by so many practitioners. Janette's adventuresome vision was more than a breath of fresh air. It was a whole forest of fresh air!

Unfortunately I was scheduled to give an NCDD workshop at the same time as hers, so we had to find a quiet table in some other corner of the conference's crowded schedule for an intense conversation. After an hour, she said she would find a way to bring me to Western Australia (WA). (I'll use the WA abbreviation here, but don't confuse it, as I often did, with Washington State in northwestern USA, which also goes by "WA".)

Two weeks after the NCDD conference, Janette wrote me: "I got this (I think) great idea to have a national (possibly international) workshop for practitioners and 'champions' on deliberative democracy (dd), using dd techniques - so we explore what we could do while learning techniques of how to do it... What do you think? Would you be interested in being involved?"

Over the next six months - consulting occasionally with me and others -- she organized a two-day conference for 300 people - Innovation in Community Engagement -- sponsored by the Western Australia Department for Planning and Infrastructure (DPI), for which she was the main community engagement consultant. She has long been a friend of the DPI head, Alannah MacTiernan, who is committed to community engagement and was involved at a number of key points in the conference and related activities.

So Janette arranged for me to come to Australia as one of the "internationally respected exponents on engaging communities" <<http://www.dpi.wa.gov.au/dialogue/comengage/experts.html>> that would join in interactive learning with the expected 300 conference participants, most of whom would be public participation professionals or government officials and staff. (I report on it in detail, below.)

In addition, she organized

- * a three-day Dynamic Facilitation training session (whose graduates did some facilitation at the conference)
- * a five-day Citizens Jury in which 16 randomly selected WA citizens reviewed deliberative methods and made recommendations about community engagement in public policy making (which they presented on the final day of the conference); and
- * private post-conference conversations between us international experts and (a) the WA Premier, Dr. Geoff Gallop, and (b) a group of WA government department heads and managers interested in community engagement.

I was in Western Australia from May 25 to June 8, 2005. Except for the actual conference (when I stayed at the conference center hotel), I stayed with Janette and her husband Moshe Karp (a former kibbutznik, still passionate about intentional community, which is also a passion of mine).

PRE-CONFERENCE ACTIVITIES

I wasn't very jet-lagged, as I'd gotten good sleep on the cross-Pacific flight. But the sudden change of seasons caught me off-guard. When I'd left Oregon, it was late Spring and it got dark around 9 p.m. But when I sat down for my first dinner with Janette and Moshe in Perth a little after 6 p.m., it was already dark. They were experiencing late Fall.

Also, not being habituated to international travel, it took me several days to get used to being driven about on the left side of the road, which can be scary when you think cars are moving in strange and dangerous ways...

My first full day in Perth, I attended the third and final day of the Dynamic Facilitation workshop, taught by Jim Rough and his wife Jean. Dynamic Facilitation is quite different from many other facilitation approaches - it is more nonlinear, for one thing - and yet it can seem deceptively similar to other practices. The WA class contained the usual mix of inspired and confused students. I helped some of the confused ones get oriented, and greatly enjoyed the passion of the inspired, excited students.

The next day I attended the first Citizens Jury I'd ever been part of -- the Western Australia Citizens Jury on Deliberative Democracy made up of 16 randomly selected ordinary local folks. I have promoted policy juries like this for years and have been a friend and colleague of Citizens Jury creator Ned Crosby and his wife Pat Benn. But I had never actually experienced a full Citizens Jury before.

Janette had run a number of one-day juries, but this was the first full five-day jury to be held in Australia. I was an observer, expert witness and enthusiastic moral supporter for the 16 ordinary jurors who rose to the occasion in truly remarkable ways. Not only were their questions insightful, but they ended up inventing two totally new forms of citizen deliberation -- and backed them up with some sophisticated reasoning -- with which we imported experts were quite impressed.

To better understand what is involved in citizen deliberation, the jurors spent two days studying and interviewing experts on the water shortage problem, which I learned is critical in all of Australia, which has had several years of drought, very likely related to global climate change. It brought home to me, once again and vividly, the vital necessity of engaging citizens in creatively tackling emerging 21st century crises.

THE CONFERENCE: A FLURRY OF METHODOLOGIES

On the third day I left the jurors, to whom I'd grown quite attached, to attend Janette's conference, which was being held right down the hall from the Citizens Jury. It was an ambitious undertaking, its schedule packed with process descriptions and practices and small group discussions. Attendees were seated at tables of ten and their comments were collected via computers at each table, summarized by a "theme team" and projected back to the group on giant screens. (This approach is a trademark feature of AmericaSpeaks' core process, 21st Century Town Meeting.)

Multiple Processes

*** What was unique about WA's Innovation in Community Engagement conference was the simultaneous study of and immersion in multiple processes over two days.***

* 21ST CENTURY TOWN MEETING - This was the overall design of the WA conference, into which everything else was embedded, as noted above. One interesting feature was that the computers allowed for organized participant feedback at several points during the conference, with results published on the big

screens. Furthermore, with some fast footwork, printed reports of the day's events were pulled together and handed to participants at the end of each day!

* DELIBERATIVE POLLING - Attendees took a survey about community engagement before the conference and then near the end. Shifts in their opinions were tabulated and reported to the whole conference before the closing. One of the most remarkable shifts was in response to the question "To what degree can citizens realistically be expected to address complex planning and policy issues thoughtfully and objectively?" Before the conference, 43% of the participants had answered "a lot". By the middle of the second day, the percentage of participants answering "a lot" had risen to 72%! (Dramatic results from public deliberative polls around the world are listed at <http://www.la.utexas.edu/research/delpol/bluebook/delibpoll.html>.)

* WORLD CAFE - After a description of the World Cafe process, participants (including us "experts") travelled among the tables during a 75 minute conversation, sharing times we had shifted our thinking significantly and what factors made those shifts possible.

Finally, we delved into what those insights taught us about how to create spaces where people can deliberate together about complex issues and, when it feel right, change their minds. Our conclusions, harvested via computer by the "theme team" and reflected back to the whole ballroom, included creating environments that are both safe and challenging; allowing enough time; encouraging story-sharing; welcoming both head and heart; involving diverse people; and providing accessible, balanced, full-spectrum information on the issue(s) in question.

* MIND MAPPING - Individual tables developed mind-maps on chart pads to lay out their sense of the ideal environment that would support the growth of community engagement -- including political, social, cultural, economic, and technological factors.

* CITIZENS JURY - Ned Crosby described the Citizens Jury process and how the WA Citizens Jury on Deliberative Democracy (mentioned above) had been convened and run. Then he had the jurors report to the conference audience their findings, recommendations and experiences. Their presentation was riveting. We were deeply impressed by the quality of thinking these ordinary citizens exhibited - so unpretentious, with so much common sense, openness, heart and (often) passion. The audience asked many questions. In response to a question about why they had agreed to participate, one juror, an unemployed man, said he was attracted by the \$150 per day payment, but then found it was a deeply engaging experience. A conservative man said he was amazed at the quality of the "tree huggers" and how well the whole diverse group had been able to work together. The jurors received long applause at the end of their comments.

* WISDOM COUNCIL - Jim Rough explained that in a Wisdom Council process, one or two dozen ordinary people are randomly selected from a population and given the mandate to explore and publicly articulate their community's concerns and creative ideas. They are dynamically facilitated to a consensus statement that is then shared with the wider community. Ideally, the Wisdom Council process (which is repeated every 3-12 months) stimulates ongoing community conversation and a growing sense of collective agency. That's why Jim often speaks of the Wisdom Council

creating a "We the People." ("We the People" is a phrase from the U.S. Constitution referring to the collective citizenry as a thoughtful sovereign power.) The Perth conference tried to embody the Wisdom Council process by randomly selecting members of the attending audience and having them talk about their shared concerns in an on-stage "fishbowl" facilitated by Jim and projected on the big screens. The hour allotted for this proved insufficient for nonlinear dynamic facilitation to generate a potent result (Wisdom Councils are usually two days long), but the general idea was demonstrated. Subsequently the conversation was continued "in the community" -- in this case, at the 30 conference tables around the ballroom.

* DYNAMIC FACILITATION - Each table had a dynamic facilitator (mostly from the pre-conference training) to "follow the group's energy" and make sure participants felt well heard. These dialogues generated a variety of approaches to engage populations in long term quality decisions, such as clarifying the diverse roles of parties involved in decision-making; creating a "Department of Community Engagement"; providing resources (finances, skills, capacity, time); more education on civic responsibilities; triple bottom-line thinking; etc.

In addition, conference attendees got a notebook filled with descriptions of more than a dozen other deliberative approaches, including some visionary ones. They were further informed as they heard and questioned the expert panelists.

INCLUSION

Several expert panelists -- especially Dr Casta Tungaraza of the African Community, Aboriginal consultant Madonna Douglas, and Ben Whitehouse, a young social worker -- spoke about how to include people (including youth and indigenous people) whose voices are often not heard, including the following:

- * Learn the historical and cultural factors important to the populations you want to reach.
- * Understand the dynamics of oppression and how factors such as race, level of education, economic status, disability, sexuality, gender, and religious background can combine to exclude people from being chosen or, once chosen, from speaking up and being taken seriously -- and work to counter such suppressive factors.
- * Identify and engage the key players and opinion leaders in those populations.
- * Explore how physical, geographic and economic factors may play a role in people's ability to participate, and compensate for these (such as by providing transportation, child care, payment, etc.).
- * Find out what kinds of interactions they've had with other such projects, with officials of various sorts, and with mainstream society.
- * Make it clear how their participation will make a difference. Be honest and don't make promises you can't keep or be too grandiose in your proposals.
- * Provide enough time and realistic information for them to consider your project.
- * Use random selection, with special efforts to reach such people if they don't turn up (e.g., don't have phones).
- * Give them opportunities to speak in their own way and to be well heard and respected for what they contribute.
- * Increase public employees' and officials' awareness of these factors and improve their ability to handle them.

HIGHLIGHTS OF OTHER EXPERT PRESENTATIONS

University of Washington professor John Gastil described his fascinating research about how jury duty stimulates more citizenship in the jurors. He found that citizens who served on a criminal jury that reached a verdict were more likely to vote in subsequent elections than were those jurors who deadlocked, were dismissed during trial, or merely served as alternates. Most remarkable of all, members of juries who found the defendant "guilty" were subsequently much more likely to engage in community service than members of juries who submitted a "not-guilty" verdict. This suggests a previously unnoticed level of compassion and concern for social conditions that lead to crime. John spoke strongly for institutionalizing citizen deliberation so that it can play a powerful role in politics, governance, and citizenship no matter who is in office. He and Lyn Carson also spoke about the importance (and difficulties) of random selection, about which Carson has written a book, RANDOM SELECTION IN POLITICS.

Carson spoke about deliberative inclusionary processes (DIPS) - public conversations that represent diverse constituencies, are deeply deliberative, and influence policy-making or community affairs. She sees these three factors - representativeness, deliberation and influence - as key criteria for effective community engagement. Worldwide DIPs were first catalogued in the Institute of Development Studies paper "Participatory environmental policy processes: experiences from North and South" <<http://www.ntd.co.uk/idsbookshop/details.asp?id=555>>.

Mary Pat MacKinnon described some impressive public involvement activities of the Canadian Policy Research Institute <<http://www.cprn.com/en/network.cfm?network=3>>. Their 2002 Citizens Dialogue on the Future of Health Care in Canada, for example, engaged 489 randomly selected Canadians in 12 groups of about 40 members each, deliberating for a day about four major scenarios for improving Canadian health care. The vision they developed -- and the choices and trade-offs they made in order to realize their vision -- were remarkably consistent across the 12 groups. These results were confirmed with a follow-up telephone survey with a larger sample of Canadians, as well as an online survey filled out by more than 18,000 citizens over a 3-month period. (This is a very thorough approach to finding out what citizens want!)

Bob Kucera, WA Minister for Citizenship and Multicultural Interests (among other portfolios) spoke about the Citizenship Strategy launched in 2004 - the product of over four years of dialogue among citizens, organizations and government officials about what it means to be a citizen. (As I was working on this report, I ran across the WA Citizenscape website <<http://www.citizenscape.wa.gov.au/index.cfm?fuseaction=ccu.about>> through which the government tells citizens how to get involved in government decision-making, how to influence decision-makers, and how to engage their fellow citizens in civic debate. I'm curious if anyone knows of any similar government site or initiative anywhere else.) Implementation of the Citizenship Strategy is being managed by the Citizens and Civics Unit under the Office of the Premier. Bob spoke of the Premier's efforts to build a culture of skilled best practice community engagement in all government agencies, especially working to overcome the many obvious and subtle barriers to inclusion.

During my talks, I spoke about citizen deliberation and community engagement as forms of collective intelligence -- and about my current explorations into how to

generate a readily replicable grassroots system for empowered community deliberation, using both face-to-face and online approaches.

Interestingly, a number of us referred to the remarkable Citizens Assembly in Canada, a breakthrough process about which I have written before.

HOW FLEXIBLE CAN WE BE? - INNOVATING "ON THE RUN"

At the end of the first day, conference participants talked at their tables about their experiences so far. Microphones were passed around and several people shared their views with the whole group. Many attendees were enthusiastic about the possibilities and options for citizen engagement. At my table one man said he was going to change his profession and become a facilitator, since he had been so moved by the quality of the facilitated conversation he saw there.

But not everyone was so excited. Some were overwhelmed with too many options, too much information, not enough time to digest or talk about each thing, always moving on to the next thing. Others were frustrated, wanting to talk about topics that weren't on the agenda.

After everyone else went to dinner, the experts, process people and organizers met together to review the situation. I suggested we try some variation of Open Space, in which people are helped to gather around their common interests for conversation or action. Those present agreed that sounded like a good idea but wondered how to fit it in. The next (and last) day of the conference was scheduled wall-to-wall. Since the need was obvious, we soon managed to carve out 90 minutes late in the day and I worked up a plan for introducing people to it. Since it wasn't true Open Space, we decided to call it "Making Space", since we were making space in a crowded schedule.

The next day, right before the morning break, I briefed the attendees about our plan. They could convene a session around any special interest during the afternoon. They just needed to write up a brief description of it before the end of the break. Thirty of them did so.

I spent most of the Wisdom Council session behind the stage typing up the sessions with several other people. They ran off the list of sessions and, right before lunch, passed them out and displayed them on the giant screens. I told the conference participants that any changes, additions or deletions they wanted to make in the roster of "making space" sessions (now that they could see the full list) should be submitted by the end of lunch. After lunch I was on a panel, so someone else typed up the final version and assigned each session a table where it could meet. By the afternoon break everything was ready and the full schedule of 30 revised sessions was handed out to every table and displayed on the big screens. We were constrained by not being able to move the tables (everything was wired up with the computers), but it worked out fine, with a couple of sessions meeting out in the hall, as well.

The sessions buzzed along intently for the whole hour and a half. The smallest one had three people in it and the two largest sessions had 16 people in each one. A few people didn't go to any sessions and several flitted like bumblebees between sessions -- both of which are valued behaviors in Open Space.

- * In a "citizen engagement clinic," experts worked with practitioners on specific process design issues.
- * In another session several people explored a traditional African institution -- the baraza <<http://african.lss.wisc.edu/utamaduni/culturalrefs.htm>>, a culture of spaces for a community to engage with itself, daily and periodically -- and wondered how to bring that sort of ongoing engagement to Western Australia.
- * Two others explored the relevance of sociocracy -- a consent-based form of organization <<http://www.sociocracy.biz/>> -- and reframing metaphors <<http://adrr.com/adr4/metaphor.htm>> to our visions of deliberative democracy.
- * There were sessions exploring establishing youth citizens juries and wisdom councils... sessions exploring how to deal with cultural differences, privacy issues, the Internet, media, interest groups, and established political institutions... sessions exploring the role of values and "the whole person" in deliberation...
- * A number of discussions explored what community engagement and deliberation have to offer in dealing with specific issues like waste, peak oil <<http://adrr.com/adr4/metaphor.htm>>, public transport, wellness services, sustainable horticulture, and sustainable community.

As facilitator, I wandered among the tables noticing the energy and picking up empty coffee cups (as Open Space facilitators tend to do), and spent about fifteen minutes in the session on the internet.

FILLED WITH POSSIBILITIES...

As I wandered out in the hall to remind the sessions there that they had ten minutes to wrap up their discussions, I stumbled into the Citizens Jury people having a champagne and cookies celebration of their success. I toasted and hugged them one last time and hurried back to participate in the closing panel -- as an "expert" -- such a strange role to play in a ballroom filled with so many unacknowledged experts!

The most remarkable closing comment was Minister of Infrastructure and Planning, Alannah MacTiernan's poignant statement that she had gotten so much flak for her community engagement efforts -- for example, the major Perth newspaper, which refused to fairly cover the community engagements she sponsored, had wondered why she was elected if she couldn't lead and make decisions herself rather than consulting with randomly selected citizens -- that she had been ready to cut back on citizen engagement. But the conference had so inspired and re-energized her that she was again committing herself to her leading-edge experiments in community engagement.

The resources for that and more sat in the room before her. I pray that she and other people in the WA government engage the participants in that conference -- connecting them with each other and providing forums for their ongoing conversation and shared action -- so that the incredible potential in that Perth ballroom can be released to play its major role in the evolution of our planet. "Just think," I said in my closing statement, "Every one of you has at least a hundred contacts. The web of our networks reaches around the world. The impact we could have is incredible..."

As I write this, I am relishing that sense of possibility -- from the event, from the political context in which it was born, and from the many truly remarkable people I met there, only a few of whom I've been able to mention here.

May the difference they make reverberate for seven generations to come.

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